

P. Crozier, Brian
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The Man Who
Lost China
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Latest & least on Chiang Kai-shek

Reviewed by
Simon Li

"The Man Who Lost China" is subtitled "The first full biography of Chiang Kai-shek." It is that, in the limited sense that it covers the Nationalist Chinese leader's life from his birth in 1887 to his death in 1975.

But "full?" Theodore White and Annalee Jacoby, in their compelling account of China's World War II years, "Thunder Out of China," stated unequivocally that "no adequate biography of Chiang Kai-shek will appear in our times." That was in 1946. Thirty years later, Brian Crozier's effort does little to dent their sweeping prediction.

White and Jacoby said everyone would be biased. People either saw Chiang as a near saint or as a monster. It had been dangerous for so long to oppose Chiang that existing writings about his career were "idolatrous." All that was left were "morsels of gossip."

Bias is not Crozier's problem. His book seems scrupulously fair, perhaps too much so. He blandly records the extraordinary corruption, treacheries and atrocities of the period from the 1911 overthrow of the Manchu dynasty to Chiang's final defeat in 1949 as if they were so many stock-market quotations.

The second part of the White-Jacoby prediction appears to have been the insurmountable obstacle. Ultimately, lack of information undermines Crozier's efforts to explain why the one man who appeared able to unite post-imperial China failed to do so.

The externals of Chiang's career are almost complete: a welter of names, dates, "incidents," battles, alliances, resignations, double-crosses, adventures and narrow escapes. One has to admire anyone with the courage to try and put the labyrinthine politics of China's warlord years—factionalism, plot and counterplot—into narrative order.

But the man is missing. Chiang, a cold, aloof man who had few personal friends, also appeared at times in his career to have great charisma. That is unexplained. He was a revolutionary whose conservatism ruined him, a womanizer in his youth who believed in strict Confucian principles and later became ascetic and puritanical. Crozier never gets to the guts of these traits. His Chiang remains masked. We never feel his presence or personality.

Crozier, once a China and Far East specialist for The Economist, the British weekly, apparently could not open enough doors to get the information that could have overcome that deficiency. His collaborator Eric Chou, a Chinese scholar and journalist, could not either. The generalissimo's surviving colleagues in Taiwan are presumably still loathe to disturb his image. His enemies and former colleagues on the mainland are not accessible. Chiang kept a diary meticulously all his adult

life but only excerpts have been published. Their presence is scarcely felt.

Crozier ends up relying on secondary sources, including the only two previous biographies in English, both written well before Chiang fled the advancing Communist forces to his island fortress of Taiwan and both unstintingly admiring of Chiang. In some 400 pages of Crozier, less than five illuminating anecdotes come to mind. Even the "morsels of gossip" are rare.

The result is dry reading, a plodding chronology in the tedious style of a history textbook. And like many textbooks, the narration is often superficial, and serious discussion of motive often lacking.

Crozier argues that Chiang was an extraordinary man whose faults, bad luck and judgment overwhelmed his virtues. In particular he cites Chiang's decision to horde his forces for eventual confrontation with the Communists rather than fight the Japanese and his refusal to free from prison the one man who might have been able to rally Manchuria for him after World War II before the Soviet Union armed the Communists for their

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That man, the warlord Chang Hsueh-liang, had kidnaped Chiang in Sian in 1936. Chiang never forgave him. Last year, it was reported that he was still under house arrest in Taiwan.

Crozier also argues that Chiang's outlook was narrowly military. He lacked Mao Tse-tung's vision of a changed China and an ideology that he could sell to the majority. An inherent problem with a book about the causes of Chiang's failure is a lack of discussion about Mao's success. Yet what gave Mao victory is surely a part of what defeated Chiang.

Still, the litany of Chiang's handicaps—personal ones and those he could not control—is so staggering that Crozier is not entirely convincing that China was ever Chiang's to "lose," that opportunity was clearly present and let slip.

The wonder, perhaps, is that so flawed a man was able to lead for so long and afterward, on so large a part of the world into recognizing his small province as "China." Twenty-one months after his passing he is all but forgotten, his mark on the world negligible.

Chiang's life was indeed a tragedy, as Crozier says in his summation, and indeed an epic narrated without passion, without life.

Crozier's previous biographies of those other generals-turned-politician-autocrats, Spain's Francisco Franco and France's Charles de Gaulle, were acclaimed. But those men, on their own terms, were successes. Chiang, on his, was a failure and Crozier cannot get at the heart of why. He found, in this one Chinese at least, that the cliché if in scrutability is hard to dispel.

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